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SHELLEY AND CLAIRE CLAIRMONT

BY EDITH WYATT

To Percy Bysshe Shelley even from very early years woman appeared in the character of a prisoner of civilization. It was his lot to attempt to free her. His encounters with life on behalf of women and thus with women themselves filled, darkened and changed his entire existence. He was the tireless and struggling servant of their betterment. He was their fickle deserter. He was their noble brother and their ignoble victim and creature. The tale of a defenseless defender, his biography as seen in this light will leave few readers unmoved, from his courageous letter at twenty to Sir James Lawrence, the Knight of Malta, in which he reproaches society for the custom of prostitution, to the day when Trelawney had to bring the news of his death to the stricken women of his household at Casa Magni.

Harriet Grove, Elizabeth Shelley, Lady Shelley, Harriet Westbrook, Elizabeth Hitchener, Mary Godwin, Claire Clairmont, Emilia Viviani—all these were the objects of Shelley's struggles for the liberation of women.

Among the thousand and one tales of his life-long expedition as their counsellor and champion none expresses his nature more characteristically than the narrative we may gather from various sources of his friendship with Claire Clairmont, the step-sister of Mary Godwin.

Shelley must have met her first when she was about fourteen and he about twenty on a chance visit of his to the house of her step-father William Godwin. But even before then his experience as a liberator had been fairly wide.

At seventeen he had fallen in love with his cousin Harriet Grove: and was much concerned for her spiritual future. At nineteen we find him anxious and distressed about the educational opportunities and mental outlook of his beloved sister Elizabeth and of Lady Shelley, "A mother who is mild and

tolerant yet narrow-minded," the unfortunate boy exclaims to his friend Hogg, "How I ask *is she* to be rescued?"

He could not indeed rescue any of them. They cared nothing for liberal ideas: and he could rescue only his beautiful little friend Harriet Westbrook, who continued to receive him after he had been expelled from Oxford as an atheist. When her father opposed his visits and letters to her and she cast herself upon his protection, he took her away helplessly to Scotland and married her.

It is not the purpose of this commentary to detail the well-known events of Shelley's bitter history of the next few years, through his separation from Harriet, and his elopement with Mary Godwin, and poor Harriet's self-destruction a year and a half later after an entanglement of hers with some person unknown.

But now that the passage of time has enabled us to see plainly that Shelley was neither the infallibly praiseworthy knight of Dowden's scholarly history, nor the facile sensualist presented by his defamers, nor yet that merely quiet, unworldly and fanciful English gentleman described for us by his wife's devoted plausibility, we may find in this crucial passage of his life many elements rather unconsidered by these biographers.

The first of these elements is the extreme youth of all the persons of these unhappy episodes.

In the next place, Shelley's connection with Godwin's household was by no means exclusively formed of his passion for Mary Godwin. He was devoted to Godwin and all his wards. Indeed he had cause for his devotion to Godwin: and if, as Mr. Brailsford has pointed out, Shelley paid Godwin's debts, Godwin's *Political Justice* supplied Shelley with the entire social philosophy of most of his longer poems.

Godwin's household was composed of himself and his second wife, who had formerly been a Mrs. Clairmont, and five children. These were: Fanny Imlay, the daughter of Godwin's first wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, through her earlier irregular and tragic union with an American, Gilbert Imlay; Mary Godwin, the child of his own happy marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft; Charles and Claire Clairmont, the children of his second wife's first marriage; and William Godwin, the son of his second marriage.

Undoubtedly Shelley desired to rescue them all; and was fascinated by them, and fascinated by Godwin's house and its

atmosphere of liberal ideas, in spite of its shabbiness and its dreadful blight of poverty. Godwin was even then a broken man. The affairs of his publishing house were failing. Duns were pursuing him. He had already begun that cringing, that hypocritic subservience to the world, that makes one wish to avert one's eyes from the end of his career. But there must have been something to repay friendship in the man whose conversation Lamb and Hazlitt sought and loved to the end of his days.

The children were all lively and clever—almost uncannily precocious, and entering into adult life, tea-drinking, the society of their father's contemporaries, and the delightful practice of filling the boxes his friends gave him at the Drury Lane Theatre at ages which seem to us very tender.

Feb. 15, 1812. Had only time to get to Godwins where we dined [says Aaron Burr's diary]. In the evening, William, the only son of William Godwin, a lad of about nine years old, gave his weekly lecture; having heard how Coleridge lectured he would also lecture, and one of his sisters (Mary I think) writes a lecture which he reads from a little pulpit which they had erected for him. He went through it with great gravity and decorum. The subject was "The Influence of Government on the Character of a People." After the lecture we had tea and the girls danced and sang an hour, and I came home.

The most striking of these children was Claire, sixteen at the time of Shelley's first intimacy, though not his first visit in her stepfather's household. Professor Dowden says she was "A dark-haired, dark-eyed, olive-cheeked girl, quick to observe, to think, to feel; of brilliant talents; ardent, witty, wilful; a lover of music and poetry, and gifted with an exquisite voice for song."

Shelley's closer acquaintance with Godwin's family, including Mary, this life-long friend, began in the June of his twenty-third year. On the 28th of July he eloped to the Continent with Mary and Claire. Much surprise has been expressed that Claire was the companion of this proceeding; and also that Shelley soon wrote from aboard urging Harriet to join them. Those who have read his correspondence unaided by the interpretation of Mary or her partisans would, I believe, not have been astonished if the admiring youth had been accompanied by all four of his young friends, by Harriet and Fanny as well as by Mary and Claire. Never was a creature less single or more single-minded in his attachments.

Remote from the ideal of our convention in these matters as his instincts were, it seems undeniable that he honestly cared for them all: that it was no part of his intention to cut himself off from Harriet completely; and that even in his first passion for Mary he was somewhat dismayed by her eager claimancy, somewhat alarmed, as he well may have been, by their project of a Continental Tour, and her assertion that she was dying of love for him; and that at the hour of departure he clung to Claire in a kind of terror.

By inducing Claire to be their companion in an expedition which was to blacken in England the names of all those who shared in it, Shelley and Mary incurred a responsibility which Shelley felt keenly till the end of his life. Of all the women of his acquaintance Claire seems to have been the only one concerning whom at the outset he possessed no illusions. Her faults—her quick temper, her moodiness and sensitiveness to offense, were on her sleeve. She writes of them penitently in her journal at sixteen; and of Shelley's "explanations" with her; and "tells" us, as Dowden says, "how she hates her own bitterness and likes good, kind, explaining people."

After the return to England she seems to have gone back and forth between Godwin's establishment and Shelley's in the next year, incurring violent disapproval in her stepfather's house for her championship of Shelley and Mary, and pursued by the suspicion and disparagement of Mary who was at once dependent on her for society, willing to make use of her, and fearful of any kindness to her on Shelley's part.

"Pray, is Claire with you?" Mary writes on the anniversary of their elopement at a time when Shelley is away from her, hunting a house in Devon. "For I have inquired several times, and no letters; but, seriously, it would not in the least surprise me (if you have written to her from London, and let her know that you are without me) that she should have taken some such freak." Her letter continues with complaints of her headaches and her tears and "Dearest, best Shelley, pray come to me; pray, pray do not stay away from me!—I most earnestly and with tearful eyes beg that I may come to you, if you do not like to leave the searches after a house."

At this one asks "was Shelley in love with Claire Clairmont?" Everyone must believe what he will from the tes-

timony of the letters. It is my own conviction that he loved her dearly, faults and all; and that she loved him dearly, faults and all, too; that he was her faithful ally; that she taught him more than any other creature he ever knew; but that he was never in love with her, nor she with him.

The next winter seems to have found Claire in London. At this period Lord Byron, recently parted from his wife, was one of the patrons of the Drury Lane Theatre. Claire applied to him for an engagement, apparently in connection with her singing. She seems never to have appeared upon its stage. Her meeting with Byron resulted in the deepest of human intimacies. She was a girl of seventeen—poor and unknown. “But,” says Dowden, “she had a beauty and a brilliance of her own: and why should a man of genius set bounds to his triumphs? To Claire the rapture was a blinding one—to know herself beloved of the most extraordinary genius, the highest singer, the most romantic and most famous person of the time.”

In the spring, Byron formed a plan for meeting her abroad; but insisted that she was not to come unattended. She persuaded Shelley and Mary, both in complete ignorance of her affair with Byron, to go with her to Lake Geneva where Byron joined them. He and Shelley had been in correspondence before concerning *Queen Mab*, but they had not met till this occasion. Here in the environs of Geneva they spent the summer which has become celebrated in Letters, when Byron wrote the third canto of *Childe Harold*, and composed the *Prisoner of Chillon*, and Shelley wrote the lovely *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, and Mary Shelley planned *Frankenstein*.

At what period Shelley and Mary learned of the character of Byron's and Claire's attachment is not known. Allegra, the daughter of Claire, so christened in London when she was a year and a half old, was born in the following January at Bath, where Mary remained with Claire through this event. She was a beautiful, a fairy child; and from her birth and before it her mother loved her as deeply as a child can be loved.

“Before we parted at Geneva,” she says in a letter of later days, “he [Byron] talked over our situation; he proposed to place the child when born in Mrs. Leigh's [his sister's] care. To this I objected on the ground that a child always wanted a parent's care at least till seven years old;

rather than that, I would keep the child with me, though of course, for the child, there were great objections to that. He yielded, and said it was best it should live with him; he promised, faithfully promised, never to give it until seven years of age into a stranger's care."

According to this agreement, in the spring of 1818 Claire and her baby with the Shelleys and their two little children, William and Clara, journeyed to Italy chiefly for the purpose of conducting Allegra to her father.

It is a singular circumstance that whatever his fascination, whatever his brilliancy, whatever his phenomenal distinction and fame, Byron inspired no lasting devotion in the mothers of either of his children. The adored of the world of women, one upon whose entrance on a street in Copet, a lady of some sixty-five years fainted away from mere sensibility, he maintained no ascendancy whatever either over Lady Byron or Claire Clairmont. Nothing is more curious or striking in the course of his intrigue with Claire than the fact that after its first ecstasy was over, she seems to have detested him. Long afterwards she wrote to a friend:

I am unhappily the victim of a *happy passion*. I had one; like all things perfect of its kind, it was fleeting, and mine only lasted ten minutes, but these ten minutes have discomposed the rest of my life. The passion God knows for what cause, from no fault of mine, however, disappeared, leaving no trace whatever behind it except my heart wasted and ruined as if it had been scorched by a thousand lightnings.

Undoubtedly one cause of the disappearance of her passion for Byron was her continued friendship with a man who was spiritually his superior. Since the Geneva summer, her child had been born; Fanny Imlay had taken her own life; Harriet Shelley had drowned herself. Peacock tells us that Shelley never recovered from this shock. In the grief and pain Claire had seen in the households where she had lived, it is easy to understand how Byron's vainer grandeur, his appearance in thunder-storms in the Alps, and his world-fame might all have seemed less to Claire than that deep un-self-concern of Shelley's nature, upon which her sincere affection for him was founded.

It was Shelley who accompanied the little Allegra to her father in Venice. Byron had made the hard provision

that the separation between Claire and Allegra was to be final. As soon as Shelley heard this he besought Claire not to give up her little girl. But it was her belief that in this course she was acting for the best for the child's future.

"She was the only thing I had to love, the only object in the world I could call my very own," Claire wrote later of the Italian April day of her first separation from Allegra. "I will say nothing as to what the parting cost me; but I felt that I ought not for the sake of gratifying my own affection to deprive her of a brilliant position in life."

Byron contrived various more or less wise provisions for the little child in the jungle of his existence. In the following fall by the arrangement of Shelley she and Claire spent a happy two months together. Then after her return there were numerous distracting rumors from the Hoppners, the English consul and his wife—that Byron was to permit a lady who desired this, to adopt Allegra; and that she suffered from cold in Venice. In these circumstances Claire besought to have Allegra with her again in vain. Ill, frantic about Allegra, miserable in the Shelley household, where Mary quarreled constantly with her, she wrote angry and unwise letters to Byron, who answered her hatefully.

I wonder [Shelley replied to him] at your being provoked at what Claire writes, though that she should write what is provoking is very probable. You are conscious of performing your duty to Allegra, and your refusal to allow her to visit Claire at this distance you conceive to be part of that duty. That Claire should have wished to see her is natural. That her disappointment should vex her, and her vexation make her write absurdly is all in the usual order of things. But, poor thing, she is very unhappy, and in bad health, and she ought to be treated with as much indulgence as possible. The weak and the foolish are in this respect the kings—they can do no wrong.

And he urges, and it appears obtains, that tidings of Allegra's health be sent regularly to Claire at Pisa. She had here formed a warm friendship with a Lady Mountcashell, a bold and remarkable Irishwoman, beautiful, graceful and wise in many of the ways of the world. She had married the Earl of Mountcashell. She had long since left him. She had entered into an alliance which appears singular and rather creditable to social history. She lived an esteemed life devoted to her two daughters and apparently well-received in Pisa in a free union with a Mr. Tighe, a high-

mindful and retiring gentleman, who impressed everyone who met him with the distinction of his manner, his love of letters and his understanding of character.

On this Meredithian lady's advice Claire left Mary's threshold. She became a governess in the household of Professor Botji, a Florentine gentleman. Here the winter turned to spring, and another winter and another spring throbbed away into the blue of Italian skies, while she still longed for Allegra.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1821, feeling very reasonably that in her position the little girl would have a harder future while receiving an English education than she might on the continent, he placed her in a convent at Bagnacavallo near Ravenna. It was on high ground. He believed it to be healthful. The place was dreaded by Claire from the first. In the summer when Byron planned to go to Switzerland, leaving the little girl at Bagnacavallo without any supervision from outside, Shelley joined in her protests at his unwisdom: and paid him a visit at Ravenna to talk with him about Allegra's future.

I went the other day [he writes to Mary upon this occasion] to see Allegra at her convent, and stayed with her about three hours. . . . The traits have become more delicate and she is much paler, probably from the effect of improper food. She yet retains the beauty of her deep blue eyes and of her mouth, but she has a contemplative seriousness which, mixed with her excessive vivacity which has not yet deserted her, has a very peculiar effect in a child. . . . Her hair, scarcely darker than it was, is beautifully profuse, and hangs in large curls on her neck. She was prettily dressed in white muslin, and an apron of black silk with trousers. Her light and airy figure and graceful motions were a striking contrast to the other children here. She seemed a thing of a finer and higher order. At first she was very shy, but after a little caressing, and especially after I had given her a gold chain which I had bought at Ravenna for her, she grew more familiar, and led me all over the garden, and all over the convent, running and skipping so fast that I could hardly keep up with her. . . . before I went away she made me run all over the convent like a mad thing.

Who can help liking the Shelley who wrote this letter? Evidently Byron could not. He was so charmed by his guest that early in his visit he planned to follow him and to live near him at Pisa. There were gulfs of difference

between the two men. But it is curious to observe that their interest in each other's conversation is so strong, that almost nothing can separate them from each others' company.

"Lord Byron has here splendid apartments in the house of his mistress' husband," says Shelley, "who is one of the richest men in Italy. *She* is divorced with an allowance of 1,200 crowns a year. . . . Tita the Venetian is here, and operates as my valet; a fine fellow, with a prodigious black beard, and who has stabbed two or three people, and is one of the most goodnatured fellows I ever saw."

Lord Byron [he says to Peacock] has got rid of all those melancholy and degrading habits which he indulged at Venice. He lives with one woman, a lady of rank here, to whom he is attached and who is attached to him, and is in every respect an altered man. He has written three more cantos of *Don Juan*. I have yet only heard the fifth, and I think that every word of it is pregnant with immortality. . . . Lord Byron gets up at *two*. I get up, quite contrary to my usual custom, but one must sleep or die, like Southey's sea-snake in *Kehama*, at 12. After breakfast we sit talking till six. From six till eight we gallop through the pine forests which divide Ravenna from the sea; we then come home and dine and sit gossiping till six in the morning. . . . Lord B.'s establishment consists, besides servants, of ten horses, eight enormous dogs, three monkeys, five cats, an eagle, a crow and a falcon; and all these except the horse walk about the house, which every now and then resounds with their unarbitrated quarrels, as if they were the masters of it. . . . P. S. After I have sealed the letter, I find that my enumeration of the animals in this Circean palace was defective, and that in a material point. I have just met on the grand staircase five peacocks, two guinea-hens, and an Egyptian crane. I wonder who all these animals were, before they changed into these shapes.

But Shelley could leave all this interesting scene to play three hours with the child of his friend Claire; and to learn all the things about her that her mother longed to know. Politics, the future of radical thought in England, the poetry of *Don Juan*, his and his wife's and child's immediate purposes and their establishment in Italy could not crowd out of his soul his concern for the fortune of his beautiful little playmate. "Our first thought," he wrote to Mary, "ought to be Allegra; our second, our own plans."

On his return from Ravenna Shelley had achieved Byron's promise that he would on his departure for Pisa

leave Allegra at Bagnacavallo. But again Byron broke his word; and arrived at Pisa without her. In the meantime Claire at Florence had persuaded her friend in Pisa, Mr. Tighe, to make a journey to visit the convent. He returned with the gloomiest tidings. The convent was managed by nuns of a harsh order; the pupils were from the most poverty-stricken families who demanded nothing for their children. There was no fire at the convent through the winter. Typhus fever from the marshes of the Romagna ravaged the neighborhood, and had more than once crept into Bagnacavallo. Here was a heavy change from Shelley's summer story.

At Claire's urgency Shelley sought to have Allegra removed from the convent, attempting to work upon Byron's feeling by describing her anxiety to him—with the most unfortunate result. We may learn something of it from a friend of Claire's, a Miss Elizabeth Parker, then staying with Lady Mountcashell and present with her household at Casa Silva when Shelley described his interview.

"I never saw him in a passion before," said Miss Parker. "Last night, however, he was downright, positively angry. . . . Mr. Shelley declared to Lady Mountcashell that he could with pleasure have knocked Lord Byron down; for when he mentioned that you were half-distracted with alarm about the child's health, and also that you were yourself in very declining health, he saw a gleam of malicious satisfaction pass over Lord Byron's countenance. 'I saw his look,' Mr. Shelley said. 'I understood the meaning; I despised him, and I came away.' . . . Afterwards he said, 'It is foolish of me to be angry with him; he can no more help being what he is than yonder door can help being a door.' "

I think it is only too plain that Byron knew well the character of Shelley's and Claire's long attachment to each other: and hated it far more than he could ever have hated any sensual intrigue. Claire's failure to be blighted by him, her relation with Shelley, and his unromantic, splendid and steadfast championship of her in her hardships were not only a criticism of Byron as a person they were a hopelessly damaging reflection on Byronism, on the whole mass of sex-illusion that floated the poorer part of his celebrity.

Claire was now beside herself at her inability to reach her little girl. She formed wild plans, frantic and vengeful

plans, it appears from her friends' replies and attempts to soothe her. She feared illness and neglect and above all typhus fever for the child.

Unable to secure Allegra's release, Shelley induced Claire to distract herself by coming in the April after Allegra's fifth birthday to himself and Mary at Pisa. Here she was persuaded to join the Shelleys' new-made friends, Captain Williams and his wife, on a journey to Spezia to hunt for houses. She had hardly gone when Shelley and Mary received word from Byron that Allegra was dead. She had died, as her mother feared, of typhus fever.

It was resolved that the hard news be concealed from Claire as long as possible. As soon as she returned with the Williams to Pisa, with the promise of one house at Spezia, Shelley hurried them all back again. Casa Magni, the establishment the searchers had found, was a white house with arches, as Dowden tells us, in a cove on the bay of Spezia. It had once been a Jesuit convent. "The hoary mountain slopes; the waters, violet and green of the tideless Mediterranean; the deep Southern sky, the fishers' black huts clinging below the little cliffs like swallows' nests; the lonely house almost amid the waves—made up a scene at once beautiful and strange." Here it was, in this house, in the wild beauty of this spot, that Shelley told Claire of her child's death.

We learn that after her first outburst of despair she was very calm. She acquiesced in Byron's wish that Allegra be buried in England. He sent a message saying to her that everything should be ordered at her behest at the child's funeral. But she was too stunned to avail herself of this. He had desired that Allegra's grave be at Harrow, in the church, as near as might be to an outlook over the open, beyond, where he himself had loved to sit in his own bitter childhood: and that this tablet be placed on the church-wall beside her.

In Memory of

Allegra

Daughter of G. G. Lord Byron,

Who Died at Bagnacavallo

In Italy, April 20th, 1822,

Aged five years and three months.

"I shall go to her, but she shall not return to me."

2nd Samuel xii, 23.

Strange are the ways of fortune. In Italy Byron's circle was dismayed by his unwisdom for Allegra. In England his tenderness for the child would seem even after her death to have been resented. He who had dumbly thwarted so many wishes on his daughter's behalf was to be in the same manner denied his desire of a gentle and dignified commemoration for her, in the hard ways of the England of that day: and the tablet and words of affection he designed for her were never placed on the church wall at Harrow. Moore tells us that on the day and night succeeding Allegra's death Byron nearly lost his reason from shock and grief.

One may hope that perhaps few women are subjected to such miseries as Claire Clairmont had known. In these Shelley had sustained her and had seen her in her noblest and best moods and her most violent and unlovely manifestations. She had remained dear to him: and obviously she would always have remained dear to him. There is something honorable to the generosity and staunchness of human nature in the circumstance.

If her fortunes were hard, the tale of her life is that of a woman of deeply attaching quality. In her most outlawed and poverty-stricken years of social disapproval for her one irregular alliance with Byron, men of standing repeatedly wished to marry her. Shelley remembered her with a double benefaction in his will. Her old pupils loved her. In Florence and in Paris, where she spent most of her career, she was long remembered after her death at eighty-one for her kindness and generosity.

More than those of any other group presented chiefly in personal letters that I can recall the characters of the Shelley correspondence stand out as though rendered for us by the hand of some master of fiction. They become so vivid to us that we look back on those care-free evenings of Aaron Burr's description, when little William read his lecture on "The Influence of Government on the Character of a People" and "the girls danced and sang an hour"—with that humbled sense of sudden tears and amusement one experiences in the quick poetry of some actual human memory. This vividness is chiefly because of the native expressiveness of the letter-writers. But it is partly for another reason. One at least of the tales we follow—that of the tragedy of Allegra and Claire is a great human story. It has the grand manner of the last simplicity. It has an elemental

appeal to the sympathies common to all mankind. Allegra is of those beautiful children of fable who are drowned in the waves of the passion of men and women. She haunts the imagination like the Princess in the Tower, like the slain children of Medea, and the far-off voice of young Itylus dead:

“ Who has remembered me—who has forgotten? ”

And in her mother's hopeless longing for her there is the tone of an emotion infinitely stirring, truly, deep as the sea.

As the helper by the wayside in Claire's and Allegra's journey through a base world, Shelley appears in the light of a distinction especially noble. Immemorially the world has driven Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Shelley was, I think, the first brother of mankind to go forth with the grace of a natural sympathy as their fellow-traveler. Others have exhorted these outcasts. But he was better than their exhorter. He was their companion.

Trelawney tells us that when in the same year with Allegra's death Shelley's drowned body was found, and placed upon a pyre upon the coast at Massa, Byron could not face the scene. He withdrew to the beach and swam off to the *Bolivar*, his vessel, in which he had been searching for the victims of the lost *Ariel*. Leigh Hunt remained in his carriage. Only Trelawney waited through the final rites beside the ashes of the dead poet he had loved so well. “ But what surprised us all,” he says, “ was that the heart remained entire.”

It had held long, of course, the fatal waters of the ocean. But the circumstance may well serve us as a symbol. After a hundred years, as we read now the letters of the dead men and women who lived and loved and suffered in his presence, many a strange wind of doctrine, many a vanished fashion of thought and speech sings to us with beauty across their thrilling histories.

“ They are lost and gone forever in their home beyond the sea—

They are lost and gone forever, far away—yes, far away—”

But the heart of Shelley has lived unconsumed in the ashes.

EDITH WYATT.